

Ethical Conflicts and Moral Dilemma in *The Scarlet Letter*

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Abstract

The Scarlet Letter primarily elaborates the triangular relationship between the female protagonist Hester Prynne, the minister Arthur Dimmesdale and the doctor Roger Chillingworth during the North American colonial period. And the minister Arthur Dimmesdale is subjected to Chillingworth's revenge due to an illicit love affair with Hester Prynne. In the novel, Hawthorne does not give much ink to Chillingworth, and in the interpretation of *The Scarlet Letter*, Chillingworth is more often seen as a Satanic devil. To have a comprehensive understanding of *The Scarlet Letter*, this essay will reexamine Chillingworth from the perspective of ethical literary criticism. Chillingworth's ethical identity and the conflict between the bestial and human factors in Chillingworth manifested during his revenge process will be discussed. And in Hawthorne's portrayal, Chillingworth is a character full of contradictions: on the one hand, he is wise and has exceptional medical skills. On the other hand, he is cruel, gloomy, and slightly deformed in stature. Combining Hawthorne's personal experiences and the writing background of *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne's contradictory attitude towards Chillingworth reflects his contemplation of the ethical conflicts and moral dilemma of his time.

Keywords

Ethical Conflicts; Moral Dilemma; *The Scarlet Letter*.

1. Introduction

1.1. Hawthorne and *The Scarlet Letter*

Nathaniel Hawthorne was a prominent American novelist and short story writer of the 19th century. He was born in Salem, Massachusetts, where Puritanism flourished and pervaded the whole society. The sins of his ancestors and his life experience have convinced him that human nature is inherently evil. Therefore, he focuses on the dark side of human nature. His works are noted for their exploration of themes such as guilt, sin, and the complexities of human nature. Hawthorne's writing style is characterized by a rich use of symbolism and a deep psychological analysis of his characters. His most famous work, *The Scarlet Letter*, is a classic of American literature, examining the effects of sin on the lives of individuals and society. Hawthorne's influence on American literature is profound, with his works often cited as precursors to the psychological novel. Despite his initial reluctance to be labeled a romantic writer, Hawthorne's imaginative and introspective narratives have secured his legacy as a master of American fiction. *The Scarlet Letter*, published in 1850, is a seminal work and is renowned for its exploration of sin, guilt, and redemption within the puritanical setting of 17th-century Massachusetts. The novel centers on Hester Prynne, a woman who endures public humiliation for committing adultery, symbolized by the scarlet A that she is forced to wear. Hawthorne masterfully employs the Letter A as a symbol with multiple interpretations, including "Adultery", "Able", and "Angel". And the narrative of *The Scarlet Letter* delves into the psychological depths of its characters, including the tormented Reverend Dimmesdale and the vengeful physician Roger Chillingworth. Through the portrayal of the protagonist Hester Prynne's experiences, the novel reveals the stringent demands of Puritan society on women

and the extreme punishment for sin. To make a conclusion that the book is celebrated for its rich symbolism, intricate character development, and profound themes, making it a cornerstone of American literature and a timeless study of the human condition. Hawthorne's novel remains a significant contribution to the Romantic period, influencing the development of psychological fiction and the use of symbolism in literature.

1.2. Literature Review

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* stands as a classic in the annals of American literature. An array of foreign scholars has interpreted this masterpiece from many perspectives. Previous research on *The Scarlet Letter* mainly concentrated on the biographical study of Hawthorne. In the researches, literary critics and scholars paid more attention to Hawthorne's life experience and provided adequate information for the further analysis. Joel Myerson gave a detailed research on Hawthorne's deeds and life experience.[1] And some scholars also made researches through the perspective of new criticism. Bo Florin argued the symbolic meaning of "A".[2] Marcus kept an eye on the writing technique of *The Scarlet Letter* and had a discussion on the ambiguity of the novel.[3] With the flourishing of literary critical method, *The Scarlet Letter* was interpreted through the lens of feminism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, new historicism and so on. Nina Tassi adopted the feminist approach to analyse this novel.[4] Joseph Levi illustrated the oedipal facets in *The Scarlet Letter*. [5]

In China, *The Scarlet Letter* also attracted the attention of literary critics and scholars. Dong Hengxun was one of the first scholars to study Hawthorne's work. In A Brief History of American Literature, he discussed the thematic ideas and artistic characteristics of Hawthorne's works. And researchers also paid attention to religious, moral and ethical concepts of the novel. Weng Changhao discussed the sin existing in *The Scarlet Letter*. [6] In 1990s, like foreign scholars, Chinese scholars made an array of researches on the symbolic meaning of Letter A. Prototype research was also a new research method that emerged during this period. Liang Gong analyzed the allusions and appropriations of Biblical stories in Hawthorne's works. [7] Hu Rong analyses the Biblical archetypes and images of characters in *The Scarlet Letter*. [8] Since the 21st century, many Chinese scholars have made researches on the ethics in *The Scarlet Letter*. Dai Xianmei starts from the specific historical background of Hawthorne's life, using Arnold's evaluation of Hawthorne as a prelude, analyzes the moral themes of *The Scarlet Letter*. [9] Yang Gexin analyses the ethical identity of Arthur Dimmesdale and points out that the protagonist of *The Scarlet Letter* is not Hester Prynne, but Arthur Dimmesdale. [10] Zou Qin explores the Puritan moral ethics revealed in the novel and reconstructs the heroine Hester Prynne's ethical image in the Puritan ethical environment at that time. [11] Although in the previous research smart muscles have noticed the ethical aspect of this masterpiece, the research was centered on the analysis of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale, ignoring Roger Chillingworth. Therefore, this essay will analyse the ethical identity and the Sphinx factor of Roger Chillingworth through the perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism.

1.3. Research Method

Ethical Literary criticism is a school of thought in literary theory that focuses on the moral dimensions of literature, examining how texts engage with ethical questions, values, and dilemmas. This approach to literary analysis emerged in the late 20th century as a response to the perceived moral ambiguity in modern and postmodern literature, as well as a reaction against purely formalist and structuralist approaches that neglected the study of a text's moral content. Some smart muscles have made extraordinary contributions to ethical literary criticism. For example, Martha Nussbaum, an American philosopher and classicist, explores in her book *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* how literature can cultivate moral understanding and empathy. Terry Eagleton, a British literary theorist and critic,

explores the relationship between ethical criticism and literature in *After Theory*. And in China, Nie Zhenzhao is a distinguished scholar whose work in the realm of ethical literary criticism has garnered significant attention and respect. Despite the debates surrounding his approach, Nie Zhenzhao's contributions to ethical literary criticism remain a significant force in the field. His work challenges scholars and readers alike to consider the ethical implications of literature and to engage with texts in a way that is both intellectually rigorous and morally reflective. By doing so, Nie invites us to think deeply about the power of literature to shape our ethical understanding and to influence our actions in the world. Therefore, this essay will use Nie's theory about The ethical literary criticism to reexamine *The Scarlet Letter*.

2. A Detailed Analysis of *The Scarlet Letter*

2.1. The Ethical Identity of Roger Chillingworth

In ethical literary criticism, the analysis of ethical identity of characters is paramount. "In the process of reading literary works, we will find that the emergence of ethical problems is relevant to the ethical identity".[12] Human society is full of various identity relations. "Because the identity role symbolizing morality and group differences is indispensable to human activities, society is the identity society, and law is the ethical law". [10] Once human identity is combined with the ethical environment, it becomes what we call ethical identity, which is not only a sign or a symbol, but also carries the responsibilities, obligations and constraints stipulated by the ethical law. In *the Scarlet Letter*, the ethical identity of Chillingworth is complicated. On the one hand, he is Hester's legal husband. He is empowered by the Puritanism. On the flip side, his marriage with Hester lacks love and he breeds selfish intention. He declared to Hester Prynne that "Let[let], therefore, thy husband be to the world as one already dead, and of whom no tidings shall ever come".[13] And he is unwilling to encounter the dishonor that besmirches the husband of a faithless woman and feigns death. There was evidence showing the punishment of death for adultery in *of plymouth Plantation*. But Hester was free of death for the reason that people believed that Hester was tempted to her fall and her husband may be at the bottom of the sea, so they have not been bold to put in force the extremity of the righteous law against her. [13] And Hester's being free of death shows the diminished authority of Chillingworth as a husband.

2.2. The Sphinx Factor of Chillingworth

In Greek mythology, the Sphinx is a creature known for posing a riddle to the citizens of Thebes. The riddle is that which creature has one voice and two legs in the morning, four legs at noon, and three legs in the evening. The answer to the riddle is "man", whose stages of life are represented by the number of legs: crawling as a baby in the morning, walking as an adult at noon, and using a cane in old age. The Sphinx riddle can be seen as a metaphor for the human condition, the inevitability of aging, and the wisdom that comes with life experience. In the context of ethical literary criticism, the Sphinx riddle could symbolize the ethical dilemma and moral questions that literature often presents. Just as the Sphinx's riddle perplexed and challenged the people of Thebes, the ethical dilemma in literature challenges readers to ponder deep moral issues, often without clear answers. The Sphinx riddle could also represent the complexity of human nature and the ethical ambiguity that literature often explores. Characters in novels, plays, and poems frequently face situations where the right course of action is not obvious, much like the Sphinx's riddle, which had a deadly consequence for those who failed to answer correctly. And the Sphinx's riddle about humans is essentially a question of how to distinguish humans from beasts. During the process of human evolution, when humans acquired their human form through biological selection, they also discovered that they retained many animalistic traits, such as the instincts for survival and reproduction. The Sphinx is characterized by the combination of a human head and an animal body, which illustrates two

points: first, that the most important formal characteristic of humans is the mind, which is actually the initial symbol of reason that emerged from long-term human evolution. Second, it indicates that humans evolved from animals and still retained animal nature at that time. We can call this characteristic the Sphinx Factor. And it is composed of two parts, one is the human factor and the other is the animal factor. "These two factors are organically combined, with the human factor being the superior one and the animal factor being the inferior one". [14] Therefore, the former can control the latter, enabling humans to become ethical beings. The most important characteristic of human factor, namely ethical consciousness, is the ability to distinguish good from evil. And the manifestation of human factor is rational will. However, the animal factor is in opposition to the human factor, representing the instinctual nature of humans. This instinctual nature relies entirely on instinct for selection, with primal desires being the decisive factor in the choices made by animals. The animal factor is the residue of animal instincts from the human evolutionary process, representing the irrational aspects that exist within humans. It is a part of humans that is not human, but it is not equivalent to true animal nature. What exists in animals is their inherent animal nature.

For animal factor, Chillingworth's deformed figure resembles his instinctual nature of acquiring satisfaction through marriage and his irrational desire of revenge. Chillingworth's revenge process can be analyzed as a manifestation of a bestial factor, representing the primal, instinctual aspects of human nature that drive him to cruelty and deceit. His transformation is not merely physical but also psychological, as he becomes increasingly consumed by his desire for retribution. As Chillingworth's revenge unfolds, he becomes increasingly dehumanized, losing his sense of empathy and compassion. His single-minded focus on vengeance leads him to manipulate and torment Dimmesdale, which is a profound moral failing. And Chillingworth's actions reflect a loss of moral compass, illustrating how revenge can strip individuals of their humanity. His character is marked by a singular focus on revenge against the man who has wronged him, which Hawthorne suggests is a form of moral degradation. Chillingworth's quest for revenge presents several ethical dilemma. His initial position as a wronged party might garner sympathy, but his relentless pursuit of revenge against Arthur Dimmesdale, Hester's lover and the father of her child, raises questions about the morality of his actions. The reader is forced to consider whether the ends justify the means and the extent to which revenge can be considered a morally acceptable response to betrayal. Through the revengeful depiction of Roger Chillingworth, Hawthorne shows his reflection on the inhuman aspect of the Puritanism. The historical background of *The Scarlet Letter* is the Puritan atmosphere of Salem town in colonial New England in the 17th century. The Puritans of the 17th century inherited the theological view of Calvinism, believing in the absolute authority of God and the complete depravity of human nature. Puritanism was extremely authoritative at that time. At the very beginning of the novel, the delicate delineation of Governor Bellingham shows that he is an embodiment of the Puritan authority.

Here, to witness the scene which we are describing, sat Governor Bellingham himself, with four sergeants about his chair, bearing halberds, as a guard of honor. He wore a dark feather in his hat, a border of embroidery on his cloak, and a black velvet tunic beneath; a gentleman advanced in years, and with a hard experience written in his wrinkles. He was not ill fitted to be the head and representative of a community which owed its origin and progress, and its present state of development, not to the impulses of youth, but to the stern and tempered energies of manhood, and the sombre sagacity of age, accomplishing so much, precisely because it imagined and hoped so little.[13] In the description of Governor Bellingham, the black attire and the halberd-bearing guards beside him reveal the majesty of the Puritans. In the book titled *Culture and Anarchy*, Matthew Arnold clearly stated:

Although the Puritans were rewarded for their virtues, their ideal of perfection was still narrow and flawed... The Puritan elders who moved overseas had remarkable achievements.

Nevertheless, let us imagine what it would be like if Shakespeare or Virgil had accompanied them across the ocean. Shakespeare and Virgil are models of beauty and light, representing all that is most human in human nature; if they had sailed with the Puritan elders, they would have found how dull the companions were! This alone is enough to judge what the Puritans and their standards of perfection are.[15]

Through the point view of Arnold, dullness and narrowness illustrate Puritan's lack of humanistic aspects. The human factor in Chillingworth is shown by his learning and intelligence of medical science. And in terms of the attitude towards knowledge and intellect, Arnold divides curiosity into two types: one is "the pleasure of pursuing the essence of thought", pursuing the essence of things as they are, and obtaining pleasure represented by the Greek spirit; the other is its opposite, a pathological intellectual activity, which is a "blind and morbid brain fever". [9] And Arnold said:

People may fanatically pursue the light, only follow the instinct that drives us towards the light, blindly oppose the moral conscience that drives us, blindly oppose the instinct that makes us have a conscience, even to the point of obsession... This fanaticism has its own mark: it lacks a bit of elegance; because of the lack of elegance, it ultimately takes the blame and cannot find the light. [15]

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Chillingworth embodies this single intellectual pursuit, a morbid curiosity. In strong contrast to the pastor's overly strict moral impulse, Chillingworth is overly keen on intellectual pursuits. The narrator first expresses moral doubts about the profession engaged in by Chillingworth:

Doctors do not have the religious enthusiasm that prompts others to cross the ocean. When they delve into the human body, they may show higher and more subtle abilities in the material, the intricate structure of the human body is astonishing, as if it contains all of life, with enough art, thus losing the spiritual view of the existence of life.[13]

It is the separation of intellectual activity and spiritual care that leads to Chillingworth's personality split, allowing him to fall into the abyss of revenge and never recover. Chillingworth is undoubtedly the embodiment of intellect: "From him, one can see the extensive and profound knowledge and the boundless freedom of ideas". [13] However, it is a pity that his knowledge and cultivation and freedom of ideas lack the warmth of humanity, so he does not have the impulse to pursue beauty and light, but instead mistakenly takes darkness as light. He only yearned for the truth, treating the issue as if it contained no human emotions and was not involved in personal grievances, just like the abstract lines and shapes in geometry. But in the process of conducting this investigation, a terrible bewitching force, a fierce inevitability that is still balanced, tightly seized this old man in his own grasp, and would not let him go until he had fulfilled all his intentions.

Although the novel is set in 17th-century New England, it is actually a reference to the undercurrent social and political landscape of 19th-century America and Europe in which Hawthorne lives. Hawthorne chose Boston in the 17th century as the setting of his novel in order to conceal his real intention of writing and to dissolve the potential energy of violent revolution, and to launch a struggle against revolution. In the era when Hawthorne lived, British and American societies were in the midst of a vigorous industrial modernization process. The technological rationality that had developed for more than a hundred years had gradually shown its various drawbacks. In 1840, the European Industrial Revolution quickly spread to the United States. This social revolution caused divisions and gradual deterioration in American political parties, and also led Americans to associate the European aristocratic system with the sins of British cities and industry and the sins of emerging industrial capitalists. The United States gradually transformed from a simple agricultural country to a complex urban and industrial-based country. This transformation greatly shocked the national characteristics and

moral ideals of the United States and Hawthorne began to realize the danger of a single intellectual pursuit. And the old and new forces were fiercely contending, the women's liberation movement was surging, and society was in a period of profound change. Hawthorne shows his contradictory idea towards revolution by the intelligence of Chillingworth. And due to Hawthorne's consistent skepticism about intellect and his cautious attitude towards the radical reform era, "he ultimately used Christian moral redemption as the way to solve problems".[9]

2.3. The Ethical Environment of *The Scarlet Letter*

Ethical literary criticism requires the critic to enter the historical scene of literature, rather than evaluating literature in a "false autonomy situation" away from the historical background. [12] And from the historical point of view of the development of human civilization, literature is only a part of human history, it can not transcend history, can not get rid of history, but can only constitute history. "Literature in different historical periods has its fixed ethical environment and ethical context belonging to a particular history. The understanding of literature must make literature return to its ethical environment and ethical context".[12] Therefore, it's important to go back to the specific ethical environment of *The Scarlet Letter*. *The Scarlet Letter* is published in 1850. It is set in the 17th-century Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony, during a time when society was deeply rooted in Puritan beliefs and strict moral codes. The Puritan society depicted in the novel is characterized by its rigid social hierarchy and its strict adherence to religious doctrines. The community is intolerant of any deviation from its moral standards, and individuals who transgress are harshly punished. This setting provides a backdrop for the novel's exploration of the human capacity for both cruelty and compassion. Although *The Scarlet Letter* is a fictional novel, it is based on the history of Boston in the 17th century. And in the novel, Hawthorne tells his working experience during his employment in the Salem Customs in the introduction of the Customs, explaining the source of inspiration for the creation of *The Scarlet Letter*. The sharing of Hawthorne's personal experience indicates that in addition to the fictional narrative, Hawthorne also added historical narrative and biographical narrative in *The Scarlet Letter*. And in *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne shows his contradictory attitude towards Puritanism through his depiction of Roger Chillingworth. There is a contradictory Puritan ethical view in Hawthorne's bones. On the one hand, as a descendant of Puritans, the faults committed by his ancestors made him bear a heavy sense of guilt for life; on the other hand, he strongly resisted the Puritan ethical and moral view, and this inevitable contradictory psychology created his Puritan ethics, which explains his contradictory attitude towards Chillingworth in the novel. On the one hand, he acknowledges Chillingworth's legal role as a husband. But Chillingworth's authority is diminished and he is delineated as revengeful. Hawthorne uses him to criticize the Calvinist doctrine that suppresses human nature and destroys love through violence.

3. Conclusion

In a nutshell, the analysis of Roger Chillingworth in *The Scarlet Letter* reveals that he is not merely a one-dimensional villain, but a complex embodiment of Hawthorne's profound meditation on moral conflict and human duality. Chillingworth's ethical identity, simultaneously a wronged husband, an intellectual, and an avenger places him at the intersection of Puritan law and flawed human nature. His transformation throughout the novel illustrates the violent tension between the human and bestial factors within the Sphinx construct. Hawthorne's nuanced portrayal reflects his own ambivalence toward the Puritan legacy and the intellectual currents of his time. Through Chillingworth, Hawthorne critiques not only the rigidity and inhumanity of Puritan moral codes but also the dangers of a detached, hyper-rational pursuit of knowledge devoid of spiritual and emotional warmth. Set against the

backdrop of 19th-century industrialization and social upheaval, Chillingworth becomes a symbolic vehicle for Hawthorne's skepticism toward purely intellectual progress and his search for a moral and ethical balance in an era of transformation. Thus, Chillingworth's ethical trajectory serves as a crucial lens through which Hawthorne explores broader questions of sin, guilt, redemption, and the possibility of ethical integrity in a conflicted world. The character ultimately reinforces Hawthorne's belief in the necessity of harmonizing individual conscience with social responsibility, highlighting literature's enduring power to interrogate the moral complexities of the human condition.

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